COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO PARKS AND OPEN SPACE PROGRAM

MSCP NEWS

EARTH DAY SPECIAL EDITION

Volume 1, Issue 2

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PROPOSITIONS 12 & 13 APPROVED BY VOTERS!
PARKS AND WATER BONDS TO PROVIDE MILLIONS FOR OPEN SPACE

On March 7th California voters approved Proposition 12, a $2.1 billion bond act for parks and open space and Proposition 13, a $1.97 billion bond act for safe water, watershed and flood control protection. These two bond acts are intended to work together to bring over $100 million to San Diego to acquire parks, open space, and protect valuable watersheds. These potential funds represent a significant contribution by the State of California to the implementation of the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP). The County of San Diego is moving quickly to apply for this new funding to acquire lands that are high priorities for the MSCP preserve. The County Board of Supervisors has already directed staff to identify funds for land acquisitions in Lusardi Creek, Lakeside, Iron Mountain, Wright's Field, and Hollenbeck Canyon. The County will work with willing sellers in this area to develop funding proposals to the State.

COMMUNITY BASED LAND TRUSTS CONTRIBUTE TO MSCP

To become a success, the Multiple Species Conservation Program must involve both government and community based efforts towards conservation. Private conservancies are an effective means for citizens to participate and encourage the MSCP process. For years, San Diegans have banded together to form nature conservancies. These not for profit organizations have helped to acquire and permanently protect land in many local communities. The MSCP provides a supporting framework for these efforts by bringing together an analysis of the most biologically valuable lands, focusing public acquisition dollars and providing Endangered Species Act authority.

The Crestridge ecological preserve is an outstanding example of how the public can contribute to the MSCP through a nature conservancy. The Crestridge Ecological Preserve is a 2,600 acre area located between the communities of El Cajon and Alpine, south of Interstate 8. This rich biological preserve has many listed and sensitive species including the world's largest stand of Lakeside ceanothus. Together, the Backcountry Land Trust (a local conservancy), Endangered Habitats League and The Nature Conservancy (a national environmental group) acquired this land from a cooperative seller. The State of California and the County have contributed to this effort by providing funding support and recognizing Crestridge as a mitigation bank that can be used for mitigating impacts of local development projects. The establishment of Crestridge as a mitigation bank will allow these conservancies to receive payments towards their accession dollars, which can then be used to buy additional habitat elsewhere.

Not only has the Backcountry Land Trust helped to acquire these lands, they are also setting an example for the public by implementing a management and monitoring program for the preserve. This management plan is being developed and coordinated by Conservation Biology Institute. While this plan is being created, the Backcountry Land Trust will implement an interim management program to verify that the ecosystem is functioning well. In addition to this effort, restoration projects, an on-site Nature Center and other community outreach programs are in the works.

MSCP PROTECTS COUNTY PARKS AND OPEN SPACE LANDS

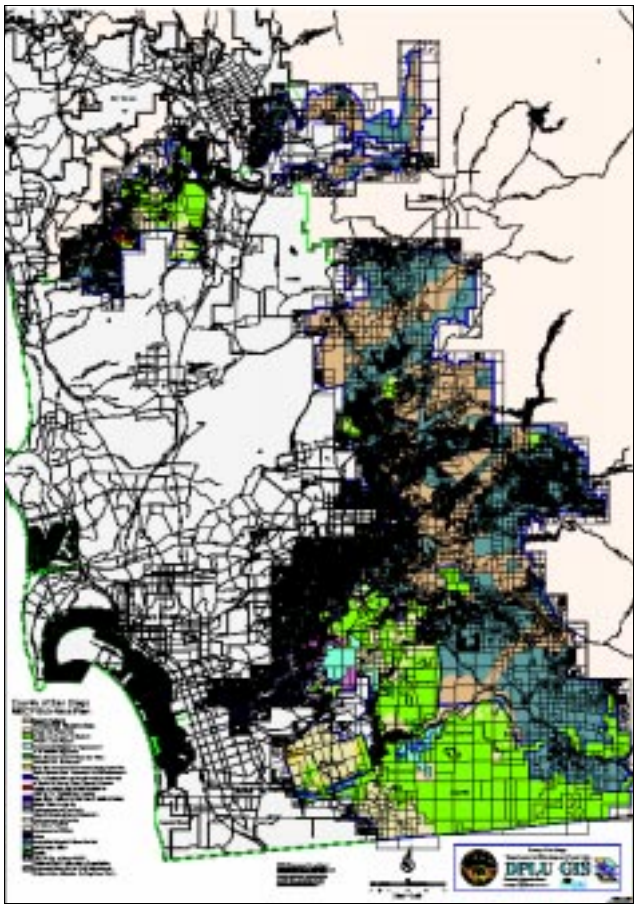
Can you imagine a Green belt around our communities in San Diego that permanently protects our natural resources and limits urban sprawl? Places where our children hike and picnic while learning about nature? The San Diego County Board of Supervisors has established the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) as an integral part of the County's efforts to protect parks and open space for future generations.

The MSCP has a goal to protect 172,000 acres of natural habitat lands in the southwestern portion of the County. Achieving this goal will not only protect natural lands for our children but will also protect sensitive plant and animal species. The protection of these sensitive species by the MSCP will eliminate the need to list the species as endangered under Federal and State Endangered Species Acts and reduce the costly permit process for private land owners and public agencies.

The MSCP is a cooperative effort between the County, the City of San Diego and other agencies such as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and California's Department of Fish and Game. These public agencies are working together with private landowners to assemble the Preserve. The County's share of the Preserve is 101,000 acres of unincorporated land while the remaining portions are the responsibility of the Cities.

The County's MSCP plans to assemble the 101,000 acre greenbelt through the following methods:

1) *Development projects will be required to set aside natural lands to mitigate impacts to the natural environment*
2) *The Federal and State government will acquire and set aside lands that will contribute to the Greenbelt*
3) *The County will buy lands from willing sellers and establish voluntary programs to encourage property owner participation.*



Cleveland's golden stars (*Muilla clevelandii*).

Cleveland's golden stars is a bulb that is confined to clay soils in the southern part of San Diego County and adjacent Baja California. It is found in open grassy habitats as well as the areas around vernal pools. It is a "covered species" under the MSCP and will be protected by special conservation measures.

VERNAL POOLS
UNIQUE ECOLOGICAL RESOURCES

San Diego County has a number of very unique and rare habitat areas that are given special attention in the MSCP.

Vernal pools are a unique form of seasonal wetland found across a broad area of the western United States, including areas from southern Oregon, south through California to Baja California, Mexico. Southern California vernal pools are depressions that fill with standing water during rainy periods and support associated flora and fauna which gradually become dormant as summer dry conditions prevail. Vernal pools are relatively difficult to distinguish from the surrounding area in the summer months. As wetlands, they are protected by the regulations of the U.S. Clean Water Act. Only 3 - 6% of the vernal pools that naturally occur in the County remain.

In San Diego County, vernal pools occur generally in three areas: the coastal mesa and valleys, the foothill valley of Ramona, and the Cuyamaca Lake environs. The remaining vernal pools in the Otay area will be protected as part of the Otay Ranch Preserve. The Lake Cuyamaca vernal pools are afforded some protection as they are primarily located on Water District Property. In Ramona, the known vernal pools are scattered throughout the largely developed portions of the town center and around the Ramona Airport. As a consequence, they are more vulnerable to impacts.

Otay Mesa Mint
A vernal pool species

The most common species found in the coastal mesas and valley habitats are: the San Diego mesa mint, Otay mesa mint, popcornflower, downingia, San Diego button-celery, Orcutt"s brodiaea, California wiregrass, and woolly-heads. Vernal pools in the Ramona area have plant and animal resources known only to San Diego County, Riverside County, and Baja California. These include the federally listed endangered and threatened species San Diego button-celery, spreading navarretia, and San Diego Fairy shrimp.

There have been some very highly publicized incidents where local jurisdictions have allowed known vernal pool complexes to be destroyed. The County of San Diego's MSCP has taken a number of steps to prevent such actions from occurring in the unincorporated area of the County. Information on all known vernal pool locations are stored in a sophisticated computer system called Geographic Information System (GIS). No permits will be issued in vernal pool areas until the proper studies and protection measures are undertaken. In the implementation of the MSCP, the County will give high priority to including viable vernal pools complexes into its preserve.

WHAT IS ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT?

What happens within MSCP preserves once the habitat lands have been acquired? You might expect that the best thing to do with these ecological preserves is to leave them alone and simply protect them from outside influences. In an ideal world this might be considered the best approach to assure long term ecological health of a sensitive area. However, in San Diego, many of our natural areas have either been lost or severely fragmented. Human intervention is sometimes necessary to help our most fragile plant and animal species recover to naturally self-sustaining levels.

The MSCP addresses this issue by incorporating very careful scientific surveys of the species found within the Preserve. This is called "species monitoring". This kind of intervention must be done very carefully to guard against unintended adverse impacts on the very plants and animals the MSCP is working to protect.

Using scientific information gathered from the species monitoring, Preserve Management Plans will be developed and adjusted over time to address species and their habitats. If a particular species is found to undergoing an unexpected decline and the reason for this decline can be scientifically determined, preserve managers will undertake activities to help species recover. This process is called "Adaptive Management."

IS THE MSCP WORKING AS PROMISED?

The MSCP is a new way of protecting endangered species and their habitats. It is the largest and most ambitious resource conservation program ever attempted. The MSCP also involves a federal, state, and local government partnership for protecting species that is unprecedented. As a result, comprehensive monitoring programs have been established to help evaluate the MSCP's effectiveness. This monitoring allows for adjustments to be made within the program if it indicates that a species needs additional assistance.

These monitoring programs have two different focal points. First there is biological monitoring to assure that the MSCP's goals for protected species are met. The second evaluates whether the County's actions are in line with the MSCP plan, asking questions such as:

- Is the preserve envisioned by the MSCP being assembled expeditiously and in the correct biological configuration?
- Is the thorough review of land use permits and acquisition of lands for the preserve keeping the impacts to sensitive habitats in balance with the conservation of these areas?

The MSCP is in its early stages, so no definite conclusions about the MSCP's success have been reached. However, these monitoring efforts help the County to regularly assess how the MSCP is meeting the needs of San Diego's sensitive plant and animal species. It is important to the County to measure their progress in protecting biodiversity.

ANNUAL REPORT SHOWS PROGRESS

To address the monitoring requirements and questions posed to the left, the County has established a comprehensive accounting and mapping program for all land use permitting and acquisition activities in the MSCP area. The results are published in an official Annual Report that is presented to the County Board of Supervisors and to the public in a workshop conducted by MSCP participants. The first workshop in which the County participated was held last fall. In summary, the Annual Report found that during the first reporting period (March 17, 1998-December 31, 1998) the County conserved approximately 9,840 acres of habitat and authorized the disturbance of 580 acres.

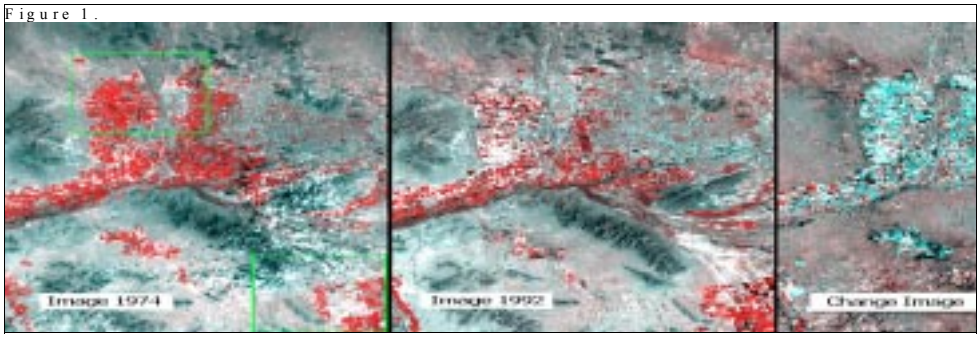
Copies of the Annual Report are available
at the Department of Planning
and Land Use Main Office, in Kearny Mesa
for $35.78
5201 Ruffin Road, Suite B
San Diego, CA 92123

Summaries are available on the County's website:
http://www.co.san-diego.ca.us/

CHANGE DETECTION

Of the numerous counties in the United States that have begun to institute conservation policies, San Diego has a very technologically advanced and progressive conservation program. Currently, through our Multiple Species Conservation Program, the County has begun a project that will use digital aerial photography and satellite images to document and analyze habitat change in our MSCP preserve system. This type of research is called "change detection analysis".

Figure 1.



In these images, healthy vegetation appears as red and man-made structures appears as white or light blue. In the final frame the difference between the two images is highlighted as light blue – indicate where change has occurred (Image of Phoenix, Arizona).

With recent grant monies from the State of California, the County Planning Department's GIS section, in collaboration with San Diego State University, will be using this technology to examine potential changes in the biology and ecology of the Lusardi Creek and 4S – Ranch MSCP preserve areas. This will be done by comparing two specialized digital aerial photos called multispectral images. A multispectral image is a digital photograph which separates the wavelengths of sunlight into separate parts called "bands". These bands allow the image to be studied very carefully so that small changes and differences, possibly not apparent to the human eye, can be accurately measured. Changes in the natural environment can be documented (Fig. 1) by comparing multispectral images, taken on different dates, of the same location. For example if a vegetation community in the MSCP preserve system significantly changed in size or quality (determined by photosynthetic appearance), this change would be detected in the difference between images (Fig. 1, frame 3). As a result, preserve managers can use this type of information to make informed decisions about the natural environments in the MSCP preserve system, which helps to ensure the diversity of plant and animal populations found in San Diego County.

MONITORING GNATCATCHERS

MSCP Staff from both the Department of Planning and Land Use and the Department of Parks and Recreation have teamed up with USFWS wildlife biologist Ron Huffman to monitor California gnatcatchers at the Sweetwater National Wildlife Refuge.

Several months ago they set up 3 plot areas to observe the threatened species. Plot areas range from 100-200 acres in size. With Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, the team used satellites to establish precise and accurate survey points within the plot areas. They then marked the survey points with temporary flags to ensure that their monitoring efforts were scientifically sound.

Recently, the team began actively monitoring the Sweetwater Refuge. Once a week, for six weeks, they have been walking through the survey points to observe gnatcatchers. During their time in the field, the staff plays gnatcatcher vocalizations in hopes of hearing responses. These vocalizations can help to determine many factors including the birds' locations and gender. The team also notes other behaviors including feeding and flight patterns. Together these observations help staff determine territory and population size. More importantly, they can determine the gnatcatchers' population dynamics: Is it increasing, decreasing or remaining stable? Monitoring aids staff in establishing the overall health of the preserve. It is a means for deciding how well the refuge is achieving its goals: to protect sensitive, threatened and endangered species.

Tracy Cline, in the field

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MSCP

MULTIPLE SPECIES CONSERVATION PROGRAM

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